

SEA LETTER

Published by the San Francisco Maritime Museum

ALBERT W. GATOV, *President* KARL KORTUM, *Director*

Volume 4, No. 1, August 1966



PHOTOGRAPHERS OF THE BAY

William Letts Oliver & William H. Lowden

Walter A. Scott

MARINE VIEWS OF VESSELS UNDER SAIL
and How to Take Them from a Sailor's Point of View

PHOTOGRAPHER ON THE WATERFRONT

A Letter from H. T. Livingston

PHOTOGRAPHERS of the BAY

William Letts Oliver & William H. Lowden

William Letts Oliver's yawl EMERALD was the fastest boat on the Bay in the '80s; the yachtsmen-photographers who manned her and sported together at Bohemian Grove were also avid for speed in their photographs, as examples of Oliver's and William Lowden's "instantaneous" photographs show—a collision in the Master Mariners' race, a log striking the water in a north coast lumbering operation, the geyser of water thrown up when Blossom Rock was blasted in 1870. Although their attempts at catching such dramatically decisive moments had some successes, it is one of their favorite subjects, the big sailing vessels of San Francisco Bay, that we chiefly prize.

Two large collections of Oliver's and Lowden's work are held somewhat intact: The Oliver Collection at Bancroft Library of the University of California at Berkeley, and the Lowden photographs in the J. Porter Shaw Collection of the San Francisco Maritime Museum. The men worked so closely, using similar equipment, that photographs in each collection often show duplicate scenes; sometimes they took turns standing in for each other. Both collections include frank photographs of the rich family life of successful businessmen of California's

Golden Years, the "dollar and dime" velocipedes that they both owned, interiors with bentwood rockers, and little girls pushing wicker doll carriages. But their chief subject, the big boats of the Bay in the '80s and early '90s, is a rare one, and gave them the chance to combine their two favorite hobbies, yachting and photography. The excellence of these maritime photographs in both the Bancroft and the museum collection testify to their skill in both fields.

A photograph taken in 1857 of the staff of a boarding school in Scotland with a camera he made from a cigar box shows William Letts Oliver's proficiency in photography at the age of 13. A mining engineer, he prospered in California after his arrival from his birthplace, Chile, in the late '60s, and thereafter devoted his leisure to photography, yachting (he was a member of all the yacht clubs on the Bay) and the activities of the Bohemian Club. Lowden, a successful insurance broker and, like Oliver, a resident of Oakland, was a native of Ireland. Apart from the Master Mariners' Regattas, which Oliver also photographed, Mr. Lowden's work importantly records the sails of the yacht CHISPA, Commodore Gutte,

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Above: the 700-ton barkentine MAKAH being overtaken by a scow schooner on the course from Oakland Creek to Fort Point in the Master Mariners' Regatta of July 4, 1891. Photograph by William H. Lowden, from the J. Porter Shaw Collection.

Opposite: Some of the gang, Oliver and possibly Gibbs in the foreground, hold everything while William H. Lowden takes their picture. From an album titled "Attempts at Photography by W. H. Lowden" in the museum's J. Porter Shaw Collection.

On the cover: The Schooner OCCIDENTAL blows out her fore-topsail as two scow schooners lead her around the Fort Point stake boat in the regatta. Photograph by William H. Lowden from the J. Porter Shaw Collection.

in scenes notable for the conviviality of the guests, as they toast the occasion or possibly salute the photographer.

Both men were members also of the Pacific Coast Photographic Association, an amateur group, which had rooms on Pine Street. The Association was disbanded in 1891 (at which time the daguerreotype panorama of San Francisco printed in *SEA LETTER*, Vol. 2, No. 2-3, that had been in its possession was turned over to the Society of California Pioneers), but throughout the late '80s held regular Thursday meetings. The first public exhibition of Oliver's and Lowden's work was held by the Association, and included also the work of other members of "The Emerald Gang," Charles W. Yale and Gibbs, among them. Photographs of the exhibition in the Bancroft Collection show many of the photographs that are known from the glass plates on hand today and some that have, unfortunately, been lost. Also seen, in one of the views, is the collection of cameras used by the group, large wooden boxes on long tripods, their obvious unwieldiness making all the more wonderful the work these two men produced.

Walter A. Scott

The son of Captain Caleb Cook Scott, master of the British barkentine *EMPRESS*, which arrived in San Francisco in 1850, Scott was born in 1866 in Niles, California. He grew up in "Mizzentop," the home to which Captain Scott had retired. Needless to say, there was much talk of ships and seafaring there. Walter A. Scott did not go to sea, but eventually became the proprietor of a typewriter and office supply business, after attending the University of California briefly, where he was an outstanding middle-distance runner.

His interest in photography began, as his son, Captain Lloyd Scott recalls, around 1906 (spurred, perhaps, by the dramatic incident of that year), and by 1915 photography had subsumed all other interests. He soon became so well known as a photographer of yachts on the bay

that owners would call on him to join them on weekends to take portraits of their vessels.

As well as growing up in a house which was full of sailing history, Walter Scott had commuted to Niles from San Francisco in the '90s by scow schooner, there being no trains or ferries to that destination then. As a younger man, he had served as crew on yachts around the bay. And as his interest in photography developed, he turned to subjects that he knew well, both by early training and custom. Although he eventually worked on assignment for McCormick, Matson, General Petroleum, General SS and Pacific Mail, his outstanding photographs, some of which are in the museum's collection, are of yachts, scow schooners and Chinese junks with which he was early acquainted.

A meticulous craftsman, he was active in the Professional Photographers Association; in early years he had been president of the San Francisco Camera Club, an amateur organization. After his retirement from business, he continued to photograph, developing and printing his negatives at home until his death in 1959.



Two famous rivals, the CHALLENGER and HARPOON, caught by Walter A. Scott in a race in which, as other photographs show, the positions were to be reversed at the finish.

Advice to the marine photographer of 1888:*

"MARINE VIEWS of Vessels Under Sail, and HOW TO TAKE THEM from a Sailor's Point of View"

by Lewis Atkinson, Brooklyn, N.Y.

To all persons fond of the sea, marine pictures are a special attraction; and, although it has often been said that in order to make a good picture of boats, yachts, or ships under sail a photographer must be more or less of a sailor, still there are many points which a person not skilled in seamanship can easily learn, and which will help him very much towards making a fair marine view. . . .

Steamers are the easiest of all marine pictures to make, and the poorest. At the steamship companies' offices, where pictures of sea-going steamers are hung out as signs, they are invariably painted bark or brig rigged, with big jibs and all sails set, to make them more attractive.

The black apologies for sails that steamers carry are only used to steady them, and out of all proportion to the size of the vessel and not a pleasing picture.

Although yachts are more photographed than any other kind of craft, they do not make a good picture, because their sails are cut to fit like boards, and trimmed so flat when on a wind, in order to point well, that there is no swell to them, which constitutes the beauty of sails.

All right lines; not a curved line above the hull.

Square-rigged vessels, ships, barks, and brigs make the handsomest pictures. And schooners heeling over to a strong breeze, with square topsail and topgallant sail, will make a very nice picture.

In taking a picture of a vessel, it can be taken in such a way as to make it a ridiculous object to those who understand how it ought to look. I have in my mind as I write a photograph of a three-masted schooner taken bow on, with a bowsprit and jib-boom big enough for a ship of 2,000 tons, the foretopmast head twice as many feet above as it ought to have been below the maintopmast head, and the mizzenmast diminished to about the size of a respectable flagstaff; the bow like the broad end of a wedge, and the stern like the sharp end—the foreshortening wrong all through, from first to last. This picture was shown and

took a prize at one of the photographic exhibitions.

But it is not surprising that amateur photographers should make such mistakes, when marine artists who have a reputation make mistakes just as bad—hoisted sails that never could be lowered; topmasts fidded on the wrong side, etc., etc.; sloops with big mainsails and jibs so small that it would be impossible to put the vessel about; and the reverse, a jib about twice the size of the mainsail—all the result of exposure at a wrong angle.

For the benefit of those who like to take vessels in motion, but have failed in producing satisfactory results, I propose to say a few words on the point of view, angle, and lighting of a vessel under weigh from another craft also in motion.

The best way for one who is not a sailor is to take the vessel broadside on from the shadow side. There is always light enough comes through the sails when the sun shines to prevent the picture being too black. The upper sails, rigging, stays, etc., lines which would be merged into the sky and lost if taken from the lighted side, come out clear and distinct.

The best position is broad off on the lee bow at the proper angle. No one can tell another what that angle is. Each one must see it for himself and act on the instant. A good picture can be taken abreast of the mizzen rigging, but it does not give the same sense of motion that is attainable when a bow exposure is made.

A square-rigged vessel going dead before the wind can be taken from either quarter; but if taken right over the stern the sails on the mainmast will hide those on the foremast, so that a ship will look like a brig, and the fore and aft sails will be so many broad lines.

We will suppose that a bark is beating in or out of the harbor, and the photographer is in a small sloop ahead, waiting for the vessel to go on the other tack, so as to get the right position. He sees the man at the wheel put the helm down, or hears an order given which tells him that the bark is going about.

The sloop goes about immediately, keeps well off, and, with sheets eased off, allows the bark to work to windward. In a few minutes the proper position is attained and the exposure made. . . .

Much of the resulting success depends on the man who sails the boat; not only must he be a good seaman, and know how to manage his boat and act quick,

but he must also be able to see the picture. It might astonish some landmen to know how many sailors can see a marine picture, and, although they may look rough, their admiration for the beautiful is sometimes intense. . . .

Steamboats are not as good as sailing boats to make exposures from. There is always more or less tremor from the working of the engine, which requires a quick shutter to overcome, and when not going ahead will roll heavy and jerking in a seaway.

A tripod on board a boat is out of place. The camera should be held in the hand or rested on the knee. The bight of a line passed around the body and made fast gives a very good support, and enables the photographer to sway with the motion of the boat without fear of losing his balance, in the same manner as a sailor has a line passed around his body when heaving the lead, leaving both arms free to work.

I use the quickest plate I can obtain, give as slow an exposure as it is possible to make, and get a sharp negative, 1/30 sec. In such a case it is necessary to use a restrainer in order to prevent fog. I make a bath the proportions of which are six grains of bromide of potassium to one ounce of water, and put my plate in it one minute before developing.

The restrainer makes slow work and the developing will take from six to eight minutes; but the result is good, and no fear of losing a plate if the alkali is added to the pyro in small quantities. I may be wrong, but I have an impression that an overexposure is necessary in order to get full detail in a sea picture.

If there is a heavy sea on, the time to take the picture is not when on the top of the wave, but when you are down and the sea begins to lift the boat. Then the vessel you are taking is well lighted, and will be more on a level. This can be easily proved by taking a picture both ways. A finder is necessary in most cases, although a person who is a good shot with a pistol, firing it from the hip, will not require it. . . .

In writing this article I have used as few sea terms as possible, and have found myself under considerable restraint in trying to explain what I wished to say in other words, remembering that marine pictures are not always taken by seamen.

If the amateur will learn a few sea phrases and their meaning, he will find them very useful when he goes to some seaport town and hires a sailboat to take views of the shipping in the harbor. Luff a little; luff up and shake her; keep her away; steady as you go—with these few phrases he can often manage to get the desired position when he would fail without them.

* Reprinted from *International Annual, Anthony's Photographic Bulletin and American Process Yearbook* (New York), 1888, through the courtesy of Beaumont Newhall, Director of George Eastman House of Photography, Rochester, New York.



Stars and stripes flying, and sails full, a party celebrates the 4th of July in this photograph by William Letts Oliver of the 1884 Master Mariners' Regatta. Photograph in the Oliver Collection, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

PHOTOGRAPHER on the WATERFRONT:

A Letter from
H. T. Livingston

Gentlemen:

When I sent in my comment on the article about the photography of Wilhelm Hester [SEA LETTER, April 1964] I had no idea that you would attach any value to it, otherwise, I would have taken more time with it. Therefore, I submit the following to replace it.

In 1893, one of my uncles began taking me with him on his trips. He was a civil engineer on the staff of Herman Schussler, the chief engineer of the Spring Valley Water Company. One of his duties was the keeping of a photographic record of the company's properties. This is where I first developed an interest in photography, although it was not until 1903 that I first owned a camera, a 3½x3½ Eastman Bullseye.

The company's camera was an 8x10 view camera. Most of the outdoor views of the company's properties, however, were taken with 5 x 8 plates in reducing kits. They preferred this size because there was less sky and foreground. Reducing kits for smaller sized plates were in regular use before the smaller sized view cameras became available.

In the early 1900s one camera manufacturer made one model of view camera in the 6½ x 8½ size only; that was the most expensive and easily the best camera of its day for any photographer willing to pay the price. Having a deluxe appearance also, it was favored by photographers doing work for their clients on Pacific Heights or in country estates at Burlingame.

The 5x8 and the 6½ x 8½ are two sizes that faded out years ago. English photographers called the 6½ x 8½ the "whole plate" size; the 4¼ x 6½ the half size; and the 3¼ x 3¼ the "quarter size."

The view cameras of those days were massively built affairs, with the woodwork heavy enough for a packing case. The tripods were also very heavily built, and only in two sections. I was told that some of the early photographers built their own cameras, purchasing only the optical equipment.

Some of the cameras did not have shutters. The exposure was made by removing and replacing the lens cap. I knew two men who used their hats. The number of excellent photographs taken showed that both methods worked.

I lived at San Pedro from 1901 to 1905. During that period I frequently saw Wood, the only photographer there at the time, at his work. The channel at San Pedro was narrow, and it was also the arc of a circle, so Wood knew just exactly where a ship would pass. There were a number of good view points on each side of the channel. Wood would select the one most suitable for the occasion, set up his view camera on its tripod, and shoot when the ship was in the right location. He could get the ship both approaching and leaving. Also, I have known ship owners to have a ship maneuvered into position and held stationary so Wood could have it at exactly the angle he wanted.

After my return to San Francisco in 1905, I frequently saw Walter Scott, one of the leading marine photographers, with his view camera set up on the end of Powell Street wharf, or at the boarding station. The boarding station was a good view point from which to photograph incoming ships about to anchor for inspection.

The end of Powell Street wharf was a favorite spot from which to photograph sailing yachts, as in the afternoon the light was good and the wind from the right direction. The yacht owner and the photographer would make their arrangements in advance so that the yacht would approach the wharf at the right angle on the starboard tack, come about, and leave on the port tack. The photographer would have his view camera set up and ready to shoot when the yacht was in the right location.

One method used to photograph large ships was to take them leaving the dock. After backing, there was a short period when the ship stopped before going ahead.

This interval was long enough for the photographer to focus and shoot.

I have seen photographers set their view cameras up on the tops of the wheel houses of tug boats and have the tug boat captains hold the boats stationary at the right angle to photograph ships at anchor, or approaching. Most of the photographs taken of the battleship fleet in 1908, and the ones in the Bay for the Portola Festival in 1909 were taken in this manner. This method works all right if the water is smooth.

I have known a photographer to put a view finder on a view camera so that he could use it as a hand camera. I knew one man who took excellent photographs from moving vessels without a view finder. He would balance his 5x7 view camera on the palm of his left hand with his elbow against his chest. He would sight across the back and between the two front posts. By experience he had learned just how much view he could capture on his plate.

One company had two 8x10 view cameras built into a frame, one above the other, with matched lenses, so that the upper camera became the view finder for the lower one. In use, the camera was mounted on a massive tripod with a universal head. The photographer would aim the camera by means of a handle with one hand, and, when he had his subject ready on the upper ground glass, trip the shutter of the lower camera with a bulb held in the other. The tripod used with this camera was always lashed very securely in position. The photographer's assistant usually stood by with an oilskin coat ready to cover the camera if a dash of salt water spray came aboard, which it usually did.

Another type of camera used was the cycle camera. This was a folding camera, made in sizes from 4x5 to 8x10, equipped with a focusing scale and a view finder. This camera did not have the complete range of movements of a view camera. It was designed to be used both as a stand and hand camera. The cycle camera was really much handier for marine work than the view

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The yacht YANKEE, taken by Walter A. Scott, ca. 1912.

SEA LETTER is sent quarterly to members of the San Francisco Maritime Museum, a private non-profit historical society. The museum is supported almost entirely by its three-masted Ship BALCLUTHA at Pier 43 and by its members. Interested non-members are cordially invited to join the museum to help support its program of the preservation and display of Pacific Coast maritime history.

ANITA VENTURA, Editor

RETURN GUARANTEED

Letter (continued)

camera, as it was much simpler and easier to hold in the hand. However, many photographers who did not specialize in marine work, and only wanted to own one camera, preferred the view camera for the additional movements they needed in other lines of photography.

When the battleship *Oregon* was first built, a photographer wanted a picture of her approaching at full speed so that her bow wave would show up very prominently. He hired a tug boat and explained to the captain what he wanted. As the *Oregon* approached, the photographer got exactly what he wanted. However, the tug boat captain saw that the only way to get the picture was to cut across the *Oregon's* bow. He got across, but was very nearly run down and swamped by the *Oregon's* bow wave. Afterward the *Oregon's* captain said that he saw the tug boat, but never thought that the tug boat would try to cross his bow, and it was fortunate that he did not. If he had, he would have tried to avoid a collision and would have run down the tug boat if either had made the wrong move.

As to the old barge office, one day in 1916, I read in the *San Francisco Chronicle* that the old building was to be torn down. It said also that no one knew when the building was built or anything about its early history. On Saturday afternoon right after work I took my camera and went over to the barge office. It was a dark and cloudy day, threatening rain, but it was a case of make the best of the situation or risk not getting a picture at all. While I was at work, a man came out of the building and asked if I knew when the building was built or anything about its early history. I told him no, that anything like that was long before my time. He then said: "If you know, you are the only man on the San Francisco waterfront who does. We have interviewed every one we can, but the oldest ones cannot remember a time when the building was not on the waterfront."

My San Diego marine negatives are now at the San Diego Historical Society. These were taken in 1916. Anyone interested in them may have the use of them and any data that I can supply.

This covers the subject of early day marine photography as I remember it, and I will be glad to answer any questions where I have not made myself clear.

Yours very truly,
Howard T. Livingston

Notes from the Museum

On Saturday, May 14, Mr. Albert Harmon, museum librarian, held the first of his library members' get-togethers. About twenty members gathered in the library for conversation with fellow ship modelers and small craft sailors. The company was honored by the presence of four foreign guests and a well-known author: Mario Uriburo, yachtsman, writer and model builder of Buenos Aires; Alex Carozzo, who this spring made a single-handed voyage from Japan to California in the *GOLDEN LION* of Venice; John Walterston, writer, of Stockholm; Christopher Carlisle, Drake scholar and yachtsman, of London; and Charles Borden, chronicler of small-boat deep-water voyages, of Muir Beach, California.

Besides studying charts and blueprints available in the library, the group discussed plans for a ship modelers' club. Other Maritime Museum members interested in such a group may contact Mr. Harmon for further information.

The afterquarters of the Ship *BALCLUTHA* have recently been refurbished, and they now hold signs of life aboard under the reign of a Mrs. Captain and her family. A parrot was housed in a gilded cage there for a night, a not unusual occupant, to judge from the pictures in the museum's Hester Collection, which have guided the refurbishing of the saloon. But the stiff sea breezes proved dangerous to the creature, and he has been removed to warmer quarters. However, a handsome music stand, accoutrement to an evening's entertainment, may be seen among other typical Victorian paraphernalia.

The Square Rigger Club, whose membership is open to men who worked on sailing ships, has been organized. Although, as Captain Karl-Robert Miethe, captain of the five-masted bark *POTOSI*, said on his recent visit, "It's all gone and done with, and the luck you needed to go with it," more than one-hundred members have attended the several dinner meetings held thus far. If any readers of *SEA LETTER* qualify and are interested in joining the Square Rigger Club, they may apply to Captain Fred E. Conrad, 180 Cotter Street, San Francisco.

During the past year, the Maritime Museum has invited its members to attend a number of slide lectures and movies on various aspects of maritime history. Among the lecturers who have generously shared their knowledge with the museum membership are Captain Ed Shields of Poulsbo, Washington, master of the *C. A. THAYER* on her last fishing voyages; Mr. Richard Childs of Crescent City, California, historian of the E. K. Wood operations there; Mr. Raymond Aker and Mr. Edward von der Porten of the Bay Area, of the Drake Navigators Guild; and, most recently, Mr. Laurence Bulmore, of the San Jose Historical Society, formerly chief engineer on the Southern Pacific ferry boats.